

"S'Matter, Pop?"

By C. M. Payne



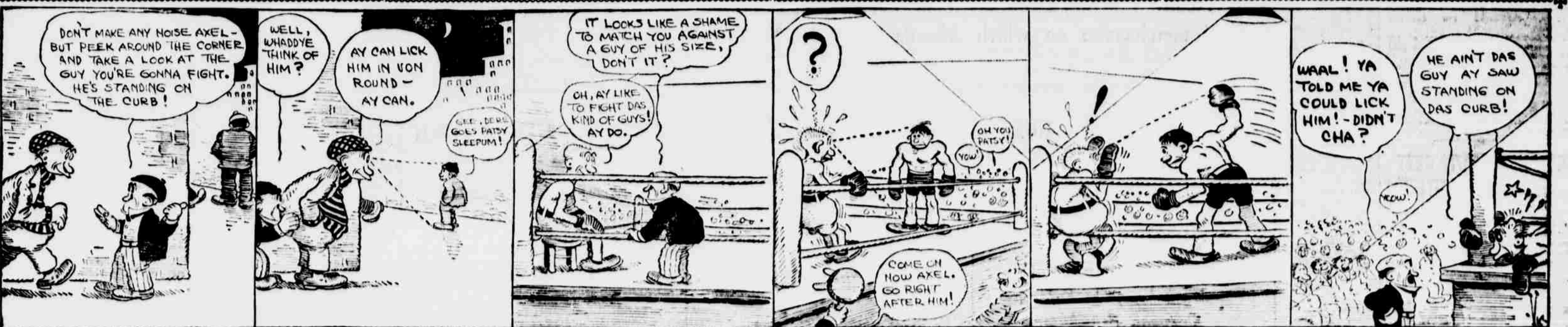
Do You Believe in Signs?



The Guy That Axel Was Looking At Was a Bantam!

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By Vic



The Confessions of Arsene Lupin

The Latest, Most Startling Adventures of the Immortal French Thief Genius

by Maurice Leblanc

CHAPTER IX.
(Continued.)
The Invisible Prisoner.
HERE, here's the straw for the customer's long drink. You will see, there's more of it than usual; in fact, it is made of three straws stuck one upon another. That was the first thing I noticed: those three straws fastened together. The proof is conclusive. The stranger took a cigarette from the rack.
"Listen to me, Farmer Gousset. I'm not here to do policeman's work, and I won't make the poor beggar look up at any price. Four weeks of starvation and frost is good enough for anybody. So you've got to swear to me, you and your sons, that you'll let him off without hurting him."
"Well, of course. Do you swear?"
"I swear."
The gentleman walked back to the door sill, at the entrance to the orchard. He took a quick aim, pointing his gun a little in the air, in the direction of the cherry tree which overhung the spring. He fired. A hoarse cry rang from the tree, and the scarecrow which had been straddling the main branch for a month fell some tumbling to the ground.
Standing on his straw legs, wrapped round with strips of tattered cloth, with his arms and his whole body clad in the same materials, his head swathed in linen, tightly packed like a sausage, the old chap still had the stiff appearance of a scarecrow. And the whole effect was so ludicrous and so unexpected that the onlookers screamed with laughter.
The laughter was louder than ever.
"The money! The six notes!" roared the farmer.
The stranger kept him at a distance.
"One moment . . . we'll give you that back, shan't we, Trainard?"
And, taking his knife and cutting away the straw and cloth, he jested, cheerily: "You poor old beggar, what a guy you look! But now on earth did you manage to pull off that trick? You must be confoundingly clever, or else you had the devil's own luck."
So, on the first night, you used the breathing-time they left you to rig your-
self in these togs. Not a bad idea. Who could ever suspect a scarecrow? They were so accustomed to seeing it stuck up in its tree! And then you had to wait. And drink! And you had to wait and wait for the barrel of his gun within a yard of your nose! Hrrrr! . . . But the trickiest of all, you know, was your bit of straw! . . . Upon my word, when I think that, without a sound, without a movement, so to speak, you had to fish out lengths of straw from your togs, fix them end to end, let your apparatus down to the water and suck up the heavenly moisture drop by drop. . . . Upon my word, one could scream with admiration. . . . Well done, Trainard!
Farmer Gousset and his four sons grabbed at the prey which he was abandoning to them.
"Now then, come along, fork out the money."
Dashed as he was, the tramp still managed to simulate astonishment.
"What money?"
They laid the old fellow flat, tore off the rags that composed his clothes, felt and searched him all over.
There was nothing on him.
"You thief and you rascal!" yelled old Gousset. "What have you done with it?"
The old beggar seemed much daunted than ever. Too cunning to confess, he kept on whining:
"What do you want of me? . . . Money? I haven't three sous to call my own."
But his eyes, wide with wonder, remained fixed upon his clothes; and he himself seemed not to understand.
"Yes, the money! The money which you've buried somewhere. . . . Oh, if we don't find it, your goose is cooked!"
"We have witnesses, haven't we? . . . All of you, friends, eh? And then the gentleman!"
He turned, with the intention of addressing the stranger, in the direction of the spring, which was thirty or forty paces to the left. And he was quite surprised not to see him wearing his hat there.
"No, he isn't a rascal!" he asked.
"No, he isn't a rascal!" he asked.
"How the sort to find the notes for us, just as he found the man?"
"Unless . . . said a voice.
"Unless what?" asked the farmer.
"Unless you mean? Have you something in your head? Out with it, then! What is it?"
But he interrupted himself suddenly, seized with a doubt, and there was a moment's silence. The same idea dawned on all the country folk. The stranger's arrival at Hezeville, the breakdown of his motor, his manner of questioning the people at the inn and of gaining admission to the farm—were not all these part and parcel of a plot-up job, the trick of a crackman who had learned the story from the papers and who had come to try his luck on the spot?
"Only smart of him!" said the old motorist, seriously belonging to the keeper. "He must have taken the stranger, who had given orders to his men from old Trainard's pocket, he-cha! to wait for him at that lower place, where he was searching entrance."
When the Goussets reached the door, they saw a car with a brick on the wheel-worm-eaten panel, the two words: "ARSENE LUPIN."
Going to it as the angry Goussets might, they found it impossible to prove that old Trainard had stolen any money. Twenty persons had to bear witness that when all was said, nothing was discovered on his person. He escaped with a few minutes' imprisonment for the assault.
It did not regret them. As soon as he was released he was secretly informed that every quarter on a given date, at a given hour, under a given milestone on a given road, he would find three gold loaves.
To a man like old Trainard that meant wealth.
When they were half way down the orchard he heard the throb of a